

Listen

A Seeker's Resource for Spiritual Direction

O C T O B E R 2 0 1 0

V O L 4 : I S S U E 4

BECOME ASTONISHED!

Several months ago, cosmologist Brian Swimme spoke two words, garnishing my complete attention: "Become astonished!" His directive guides my daily interactions with people, my work, and my own inner aliveness. Five syllables in two simple words accompany me during difficult, vulnerable times, as a mantra to see with new eyes, and to love with an increasingly broad, courageous heart.

As I intentionally integrated *become astonished* into my contemplative practice, another question posed itself to me, asked by physicist, Arthur Zajonc: "Is it possible to be alive, active in the world, and yet have such calm, such kind of inner openness and presence that one can lead a life, at least in part, that is an expression of that quality of meditative quiescence that's on the one hand quite alert and on the other hand, completely at ease, completely at rest?"

Yes, I believe it is possible. I want to be astonished. I want to be alert, and at ease, both calm and vivid in my inner aliveness, able to respond with immediacy and presence. And, I want this for you too.

To *become astonished* is not as simple as I initially anticipated. Every time I write a series of numbers and letters on an envelope, stick a postage stamp in the upper right corner, and create a piece of mail, I *become astonished* about how



Grey Crowned Crane—*Balearica regulorum*

a piece of paper can travel from here to anywhere. Potential is everywhere. And yet, I discover that complexities of thought, emotion, busyness, and fatigue stall me, diverting my attention away from the gift of astonishment, surprise, wonder, and mystery.

Why would it be valuable to cultivate the contemplative practice of astonishment? My intuition and experience inform me that our willingness to *become astonished* by someone or something develops compassion, integrity, kindness, creative action, forgiveness, and a heightened ability to be fully human, fully alive. I learn—maybe you do too—that when we *become astonished*, we:

- Let go of preconceived ideas and patterns of thinking
- Allow the present moment to interrupt the past and future
- Engage our senses
- Nurture alertness
- Trust unknown possibility, mystery
- Grow laughter and delight

- Engage
- Discover unimaginable reality
- Risk forgiveness, transformation
- Dare to be brave
- Become healers and healed, joyful
- Inspire gratefulness

Will you please seek to *become astonished*, at least once, every day? I urge you to be willing to be surprised. If you say *yes*, I imagine your life and inner aliveness will become more peaceful, transparent, and vital. You will grow in service and compassion. Gratefulness for your experiences in daily living will increase. Envision the daily stories you can share with family, friends, and spiritual companions! Do it—look around, glance within—*become astonished*.

Share your stories at the *Become Astonished* Spiritual Directors International blog post, <http://bit.ly/BecomeAstonished>

—Pegge Bernecker

SEEDS OF INTEREST:

- Field Guide: Gratitude
- Field Notes: Listening, Truth Be Told
- Poetry: *Belief*
- Global Resources
- Book Review: *Surprisingly Happy: An Atypical Religious Memoir*
- Ask Owl

GRATITUDE

"Although we may not feel grateful for some of the events in our lives, we can set an intention to live out of the energy, the spaciousness that gratitude gives us." –Brother David Steindl-Rast, OSB

Why is it important to live our lives in gratitude?

Gratitude is a luscious experience. It wells up within us, and our body feels the wonder of its flow. Gratitude creates inner spaciousness that allows us to rest in the order of life—as it is. With gratitude we attune to our own rhythm, body, and soul, which helps us to find our place in relationships, and in the situations of our life. The generosity of our experience supports us to be generous.

Gratitude supports us to trust life. In the fullness of our experience of gratitude we do not grasp, cling, or force life energy into our expectations and ideas. Instead room is created to connect with our deep wisdom. Wisdom roots us in our talents, our creativity, our possibilities, and our limitations. Gratitude creates room for playfulness, ease, and a sense of adventure.

Gratitude involves listening on many levels. It allows us to hear the meaning behind words, to see meaning reflected in one's body, in one's life, and in the silence where our souls commune. Gratitude is not afraid of pain; it remains open and receives compassionate listening for every nuance of what may need communication and response.

Gratitude allows us to discern our choices. Since gratitude is an energy that accepts what is, we no longer look for the *right thing* to do in life. Gratitude allows us to feel our lives, to know what the experiences of our life mean to us. We let the life we are living *now* inform our next step. We learn our yes and our no, what we like, and do not like, what we want, and what we do not want. Gratitude supports us to be cocreators with all of life.

Gratitude wakes us up and makes us feel alive. It is about feeling and knowing our connection to the flow of life that is within. From this place we are usually led to care for ourselves, others, and the world—because we are one. Rooted in gratitude, our response takes into consideration the wellbeing of all. 🌱

— Mary Millerd, MATS, BEd, lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, where she teaches spiritual formation and spiritual companioning using energy-based-therapy principles. She is a spiritual director, healing arts practitioner, and retreat leader. Her e-mail is millerds@direct.ca.

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LISTENING, TRUTH BE TOLD

"They're coming! They're walking up the sidewalk right now."

My heart pounding, I rush to the window to grab a peek of the twenty-two women, dressed in white cotton v-neck tops and white cotton pants, who walk single file. Each wears white shoes. In a rhythm, they walk; pass through an opening in the two-story, barbed-wire, chain-link fence, and into the stark, white, historical, concrete building where they will be welcomed by me, and three other *free world* women.

These twenty-two women have made a conscious decision to embark on a journey of speaking their truth—to tell stories about their lives, in particular the stories that led them to a life of incarceration. For the next fourteen weeks, they will form a community, and will learn the tool of respectful listening.

The listening, for me, begins when I first see their faces, and begin to greet each woman. A few hide behind a friend, some stand in an invisible barrier, others stand tall and smiling. I am drawn to the one woman that darts for the corner of the room. Sitting alone, her energy calls to me the loudest. I approach her and say, "Looks like you need some time alone." "I'm shy," she replies. I ask, "Can I sit?"

She nods her head, and I tell her how happy I am she is here. She keeps her head bowed and I say again, "I

am glad you are here—you made a courageous decision to come and use your voice to speak about yourself." She looks at me, and says, "I am almost forty years old, and I know I need to do something different." Now her tears are talking.

Enough is said, and I move on to another young woman, and another, and another.

I read a woman's nametag and say, "Esmeralda, I am so happy you are here." She approaches me with her hand over her mouth, so I lean in to hear her whisper: "No one has called me Esmeralda in four years. No one in this room knows my name. I am known by my number and my last name." I look into her maple brown eyes and ask, "Is it okay if we call you Esmeralda?" Her smile is all the answer I need.

In our closing circle, a young girl, probably twenty-five, leans her head onto my shoulder, "You smell good. Do you use Gain soap?" "Not sure, but I think so," I reply. Her response: "You smell like my mother." I hug her and see her tears hold tight to her bottom lashes—no time for emotions, not right now.

Listening is my life purpose. Listening to stories of truth saves my life and is why I have chosen to spend the last ten and a half years listening to women in prison. Listening forms relationships and community. We may never know the gift of our listening presence or the stories that could very well be left unspoken, unsaid.

—Carol Waid is cofounder of Truth Be Told, a nonprofit organization that works with women behind and beyond bars. She lives in Austin, Texas, USA, and her e-mail is carol@truth-be-told.org.

REFLECT

Who do you listen to? Is there someone—even a stranger—who listens to you? What truth can you speak?

Listen

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variety of spiritual traditions, and discover excellent questions to ask yourself, and any potential spiritual directors you choose to interview. To locate a spiritual director or guide, go online to *Seek and Find: A Worldwide Resource Guide of Available Spiritual Directors*. More than 6,000 spiritual directors are listed by geographical location at www.sdiworld.org.



Belief

Like the body, Belief
Starts at the head,
A processing of nerves
Ganglion, tangled
Logical and semi-logical connections.

Eventually you swallow—
Gulp of faith—
Having tasted,
To see how it settles.

Next to the belly,
Deep seat of
Satisfaction
Or indigestion.

The proposed morsel,
First entertained,
Then swallowed,
Absorbed
Now presents fuel
Or toxin.

Time will tell.

Now to the heart,
This substance becomes
Essence
Part of you,
Your bloodstream
Carried like oxygen
To your cells,
And a pulse against which
You hold all other beats.

The flavor is insignificant,
In the end,
What counts
Is the cell gulping for life.

A lie, like cola
Or cigarettes
Promises sustenance,
Delivers death.

A truth,
Once digested,
Brings to the arches of your feet
A trembling fibrous strength.

And this is how we know Belief,
Not savory thought or creed,
But that which we digest, and what
Fuels action: faith turned deed.

— Alexandra Martin, Oakland, California, USA

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REVIEW

***Surprisingly Happy: An Atypical Religious Memoir* by Sheila Peltz Weinberg**

Amherst, MA: White River Press, 2010

105 pages, USD\$14.00

Reviewed by Rabbi Jacob J. Staub, PhD

As recently as twenty years ago, the North American Jewish leaders regarded the attraction of Jews to Eastern religions as a threat. Today, mindfulness meditation services and yoga groups are easy to find in the non-Orthodox Jewish world. Rabbinic and lay leaders have reclaimed contemplative practices, interpreting them in Jewish terms, and they now frequently understand traditional Jewish prayer and ritual as a spiritual practice leading to insight and a sense of the sacred and eternal. What led to this transformation?

While she does not deserve all the credit for this evolution, Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg has been a pivotal teacher of spiritual practice in the Jewish community over the last two decades. Ordained as a Reconstructionist rabbi in 1986, she was instrumental in organizing meditation retreats and training programs for rabbis with Vipassana (mindfulness meditation) teacher Dr. Sylvia Boorstein, who taught dozens and dozens of rabbis and lay leaders to be mindfulness meditation teachers.

In the last decade, Weinberg has been a central teacher at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, at which over 400 rabbis, cantors, educators, social activists, and lay leaders have studied. She also serves as a spiritual director. She exemplifies a willingness to enrich Jewish spiritual practice with the insights of other religious traditions.

Her personal story, documented in this memoir, is thus a significant piece of contemporary Jewish religious history, providing insight into the spiritual hunger of the boomer generation and the many roads taken on that quest. Weinberg's narrative is startlingly honest as she takes us through political activism, psychedelic experience, Ouspensky, twelve-step recovery from alcoholism, and Anusara Yoga. Even more moving is her uncompromising assessment of her—and our—everyday idolatries: beliefs and behaviors that aspire to control reality, whether food and coffee, or stories of resentment and fantasies of glory. "False gods rob me of the true power I do possess, the power to feel my own aliveness ... to open myself to be the chariot for divine grace" (73).

This book is poignant and moving because she does not claim to be more pious or problem-free than the rest of us; her message is powerful because she shares the pain of her journey—and acknowledges that it is a daily struggle. "If these

practices are supposed to help me wake up and remember who I am in the highest sense, what happens when I forget? ...What is helpful is the possibility of *teshuvah*, returning to the intention. The good news is that I can return no matter how many times I forget, fall down, or wander off" (74-75).

Weinberg is also an accomplished liturgist whose work appears in prayerbooks like the Reconstructionist *Kol Haneshamah* series. Her memoir includes many devotional poems, each effective because she captures experiences we all share. Here are a few lines from "Compassion":

I stand at the center of shame and blame....
Somehow I reach for the prayer book.
The words speak to me.
They speak of shelter and refuge.
They know.
You do not abandon those who seek you.
And I seek You. (65)

For everyone interested in the possibilities of Jewish spiritual practice in the twenty-first century, Weinberg offers an accessible and insightful window.

—Rabbi Jacob J. Staub, PhD, is Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Spirituality at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, USA, where he directs the program in Jewish Spiritual Direction. He is co-author of *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (2000). He can be reached at jstaub@rrc.edu.



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ASK OWL

Question: Upon returning from a family vacation, I received unexpected news—my employment was terminated with two weeks notice and very little severance pay. To make matters worse, I have not been financially responsible, and although I had a higher salary than many, we lived paycheck to paycheck, rarely adding to savings. I realize now that a large part of my identity is wrapped up in being a provider for my family. These past few months of unemployment have been humbling as I attempt to make enormous changes in our lifestyle, and to locate and secure employment. I go to church; I love God and my family. Is it possible that a spiritual director can aid me during this time of transition when I am forced to change my approach to life?



Hoot Hoot: Yes, a spiritual director would be an excellent companion to you during this time of transition. It is important for you to realize, however, that a spiritual director is not a financial planner—even if you choose to share parts of your story and experiences that

encompass finances, justice issues with work and time, compensation, underemployment, unemployment, and charitable giving. When we grow in the contemplative life, desiring to integrate all the parts of ourselves, nothing is excluded. Sometimes, when the unexpected occurs, as you describe, it can carry an opportunity to be brave, forgive, and change direction—

in spite of very real angst, disillusionment, and even anger. In all likelihood, the topics you choose to share during spiritual guidance will include understanding your dance with finances, meaningful work, identity, and your prayer life. The practicalities of living hold power. Thus, we are well served during spiritual direction when we invite the sacred into every part of our life. A gift of spiritual direction is the encounter of compassionate listening that can lead to forgiveness, healing, and our discerned, next, best step. Yes, a spiritual director might be an enormous blessing to you during this time of difficult and unanticipated transition. 🦉

—If you have a question for Owl, please e-mail Listen@sdiworld.org.

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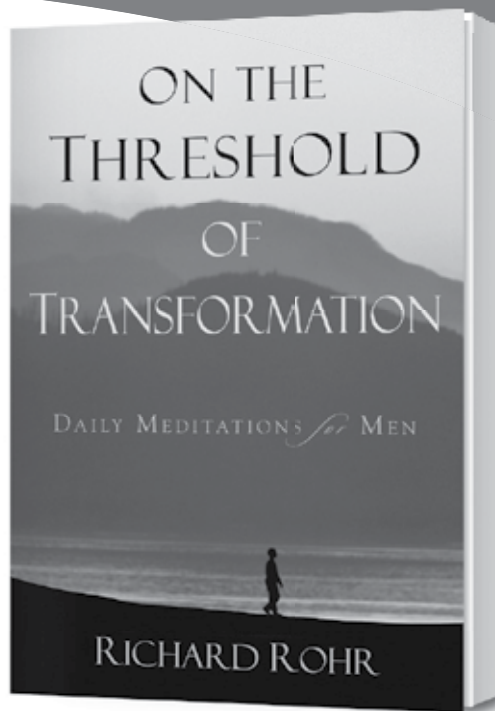
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